Zoltán Kodály

The characteristics of a good musician are a well-trained ear, a well-trained mind, a well-trained heart, and a well-trained hand. All four parts must develop together in constant equilibrium. –Kodály

Kodály was an early twentieth-century ethnomusicologist, composer, and advocate of music education. Born in 1882 in Hungary, he became aware as a young man of the beauty of Hungarian folk songs. He was so enamored of them that, starting around 1905, he and fellow musician Béla Bartók undertook the task of systematically collecting and analyzing folk music from Hungary, Romania, and all over southeast Europe. These folk materials influenced his compositions, which were very vocally oriented. His love of music spurred Kodály to being teaching, and it was then that he realized the need for a better music education to make people more receptive of their musical culture. He started a singing movement in the 1930s for young people, using group singing as the basis for his new ideas. From then until his death in 1967, Kodály was very active and involved in developing his method and education principles.

The basic underlying principle of Kodály’s philosophy is that “Music is for everyone.” The other seven foundational ideas that he believed were as follows: (1) Everyone has the right to be musically literate. (2) Teachers should use the students’ most natural instrument, the voice. (3) Music education should begin at an early age. (4) Children should begin by learning their musical mother-tongue (the folk songs of their own cultures. (5) Only music of the highest quality should be used in the classroom. (6) Teachers should follow the stages of child development in a sequential approach to learning music, using the known to discover the unknown. (7) To be an excellent teacher, one must also be an excellent musician and scholar.¹ His educational method involves the use of solfege with a movable do and hand signs, rhythmic movements and mnemonic syllables, pentatonic folk melodies, and an emphasis on unaccompanied song. Kodály believed that music should be one of the prime necessities of life for students, and insisted that children learn by singing, as it develops both the ear and the brain.
Kodály’s methods can fit in quite nicely with the National Standards that the NAfME has set forth for music educators. Using his methods, children are taught how to sing confidently and in tune alone and with others, they can develop the skills to improvise melodies and variations, they learn to read and notate music, and understand music as it relates to their culture. Just taking Kodály at face value hits about half of the standards, and individual teachers can modify the use and direction of his methods to include the rest.

The Kodály method was intended for schoolrooms, and lends itself well to the American approach to schooling. It is meant to be used as a complete music curriculum through all grades, which provides continuity for students progressing through a K-6 school. It also allows teachers the freedom to use their creativity and experience to come up with techniques created around Kodály’s principle. In practical application, there are three strategies to keep in mind when using the Kodály method—preparation, presentation, and practice. One of the Hungarian’s key ideas was to use the known to discover the unknown, and so when teaching children something new, the teacher should let the students experience the concept through song, speech, movement, instruments, and the like. Once they are thoroughly familiar with it and it is no longer foreign, then the teacher isolates the concept and presents it to the students. After that, the students practice and review, using and identifying the new material in different contexts. In this sequential lesson planning, the daily lesson plan usually involves two or three concepts in various stages of preparation or practice.

Because the Kodály method is partly based in the idea of child development, it is very practical to apply across the entire elementary school grades. Even though the same methods are used to teach material, the amount of learning and the difficulty can be tailored to each classroom depending on how advanced the students are. The hand movements and rhythmic syllables and movement are also easy to implement, and incorporate a kinesthetic factor to reach those types of learners.
As I am developing my philosophy of education, several of the Kodály principles resonate with me. Because music is such an integral part of being human, I agree that every child should learn music, and instruction should begin at an early age. I think that the idea of moving from familiar to the abstract is an effective mode of teaching—after all, a person cannot learn a new concept without being able to relate it to something he already knows. I also agree with basing teaching off the development of the child. Teaching is most effective when material is developmentally appropriate and presented in a manner that the child can comprehend at that stage of life.

If a teacher were interested in learning the Kodály method, or even in incorporating some of the techniques into his classroom, there are many resources he can find. One is the Organization of American Kodály Educators (www.oake.org), which has a number of lesson plans that can be adapted and used in the classroom. Another is the International Kodály Society (www.iks.hu), which provides a great deal of information on the method and information on workshops to attend to be certified. Lois Chosky's books The Kodály Method I and II provide more than 200 songs and a highly sequential method of teaching them using all of the components of the method. Music in Preschool by Katalin Forrai discusses how this method can be used and developed in preschool and kindergarten, and offers suggestions for planning lessons and curriculum.

1 Taken from www.capital.edu/kodaly-philosophy
Works Cited


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